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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses informal, semiformal, and formal speaking and writing, three language levels that differ from one another in organization, preparation, intent, tone, and audience. By demonstrating the essential unity of writing, speaking, reading, and listening, speech communication teachers can develop students' abilities in all the language arts. (RL)

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LANGUAGE LEVELS IN WRITING AND SPEAKING

Melvin H. Miller

I would say to students in any course in our field on the first day:

> We must speak and write and read and listen and we must do it a good share of our time until we die. This, then, is the most important business you will be engaged in during your years here and if you can learn to do it fairly effectively, perhaps even with a bit of grace, you will find your career strengthened and your life enhanced.

At a time when teachers everywhere are under heavy indictment to improve the quality of their students use of language, it is appropriate to suggest that the teacher of speech communication has a unique opportunity to help students to begin to obtain some mastery over their language. Unique because most people speak more words in a single week than they will write in a lifetime and thus have a greater opportunity to understand the role of language in their daily affairs.

If the focus of our work is on those elements common to all language, students can begin to understand the role of language in writing, in reading, in listening as well.

For, of course, we are not just speakers. We are also writers and readers and listeners and we use just one language to do it all. The teacher

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of speech communication is in a particularly fortuitous position to help students understand the flexibility of their language. One of the difficulties of modern textbooks in either English or speech communication is that they focus on the often contrived differences between speaking and writing rather than the much more useful theme of commonalities. As a result, students often graduate with the fuzzy notion that they must master a language of speech and a language of writing rather than just one used in many different ways. (I discussed this point in a piece in our Journal several years ago.)

We know that this is an over-languaged society. There is:

Too much writing in the world

Too much talk

Too much for us to read

Too much for us to hear

And there is too little time to do any of it.

I submit that in an age of communication overkill, whether your message survives is much less a question of the medium you use, than whether it has worth enough for us.

Would we not be in a much stronger position, then, with both our administrators and our colleagues in English if we could say to them, "You and I know that we are speakers one minute, writers the next, readers and listeners a lot of the time and our joint concern ought to be to improve this one language that we use in so many different ways."

I submit that the tough problems of language are common to all communication:

Having something to say

Having the right words to say it

Knowing how to organize it

Wanting someone to understand it

Saying it with clarity and directness and possibly even

with a bit of style and wit.

If we are to teach students to be in charge of all of their language, we must teach these elements which are common to all language. We must take advantage of the serendipitous nature of language commonality which means that improvement at any level or medium ought to mean improvement at all levels--but this is likely to occur only if we are considering it as one language. After all, language is a tool--and it ought to do any job we call on it to do.

I would like to suggest to you that one of the ways we can see and our students can see, this integration of language is by teaching the levels of language usage.

To some extent, the English people have done this in teaching writing but they, no more than we, have considered oral prose to have the same characteristics.

Incidentally, the failure of the people in English to even teach writing is splendidly stated in Ron Allen's hard-hitting speech to the Texas Speech Communication Association. It is entitled, "Do you Really Want to Know Why Johnny Can't Write (or Read, or Speak, or Listen)?" and it was published in Vital Speeches for December 15, 1976. You ought to read it every Monday morning before you go to school.

That the need to demonstrate the essential unity of writing, speaking, reading and listening is a matter of both relevancy and immediacy is clear.

The current issue of SPECTRA suggests that we have not reached our colleagues in other fields nor have we demonstrated to the public that speaking and listening are central to the development of reading and writing skills. . . .

In this same issue, the Educational Policies Board of SCA notes one example of this lack: the publication of Competency Tests and Graduation Requirements by the National Association of Secondary School Principals which (and I quote) "narrowly define English and are devoid of speaking and listening skills."

Craig Streff in his special report to the members of this Association this spring, makes the point clearly when he writes:

"Now is the time for us to start convincing society and administrators of some very important facts: that listening and speaking are basic to reading and writing, that what we want is a totally educated communicating child, that speech and communication teachers are necessary to the teaching of language and composition skills we deem so important to the child's life."

How do we do that? We do it precisely the way we should be teaching our subject--by speaking and writing about it wherever and whenever we can--in other words, we demonstrate that we can use our language to do whatever we need to do--we demonstrate that we have something to say, that we can speak and write persuasively, that we can adapt to our audience whatever the medium, whatever the size, whatever the level. That we can do what we say we teach.

I would suggest that if we can demonstrate to our students and to our colleagues that we are talking and teaching the essential unity of language usage and that students need all the help they can get from whatever source (including the English department) that we strengthen our position rather than weaken it.

Sometimes, it seems to me, we are so caught up with our focus on oral skills that we simply do not consider the language as a process of which orality is but a part. I would suggest to you today that if we consider the intent of language to be of primary importance rather than the medium used, we can see more clearly the essential commonality of our language.

For purposes of discussion, let's divide the language into three levels: informal, semi-formal and formal. Such gross distinctions, of course, could be refined.

Level One I would characterize as Informal Communication. This very personal level of language is usually created "as we go." Much of the time it is "in process" communication. It does not seem to me to make very much difference whether it is a quick scribble on a piece of scrap paper or a chat at the water bubbler. There is a tenor in one's prose, incidentally, which runs through all of our communication in whatever level or whatever medium.

For example, our charming and enthusiastic Vice-President of this Association, Elaine Schroeder, I would characterize as one who talks in "breathless prose." When she changed the program to accommodate Barbara

Lieb Brilhart, she sent me a one paragraph ditto. The paragraph, perfectly appropriate for an informal message, contained eighteen exclamation points. Breathless prose is breathless prose in speaking or in writing. And, as so often occurs in this personal informal communication, there was a bit of the non-verbal also--the little logo of a smiling face sketched in to say hello. Again, a smile is a smile--in writing or speaking.

I just can't believe that whether Elaine phoned me, stopped me on the campus, or sent the note, makes very much difference at all. She might have done any of these things or she might have done all of them. They are simply ways to carry out her intent and she uses the medium which is most appropriate.

Level Two: Semi-formal writing and speaking is again, alike if we are considering intent and tone, rather than medium, to be of first importance. Most of the messages we have received about this convention I would classify as semi-formal. Much of the program you are listening to this weekend would also fit this category. This presentation, for example. You expect me to be prepared but to be fairly informal. You have expectations and so do I.

This level gives us the most trouble, it seems to me, because we don't always read our audience expectations very well. We are much more sure that something is informal or something is formal than someplace in between. As we know from politics, those on one end or the other of the political spectrum are much surer of what they are attempting to do, than most of us who flounder around in the middle. At this semi-formal level we are pretty much on our own. As a general rule, either in writing or

in speaking we ought not to be any more formal than we need to be to meet audience expectations but no less than we need to be.

Let me give you a couple of examples which illustrate how we can so easily misjudge the level of language used. The first is an example of writing and the second speaking.

Part of my job at UWM is to serve on a small committee which evaluates candidates for admission to our graduate program. As part of our admission requirements, we ask for three letters of recommendation. We usually meet weekly to go over the applications and to share jointly the letters of recommendation. As you might judge, we have certain expectations for this kind of semi-formal communication. Last week we got a letter from the head of a public relations firm. I quote the letter exactly: "He's a hell of a good man, fellows, and he has a damn pretty wife."

Now, that kind of informal message in a semi-formal communicative situation was simply inappropriate and the misreading of the level was a more serious problem than whether that recommendation was a written one or a spoken one. (Incidentally, I suggested we admit his wife.)

He misjudged the semi-formal nature of the situation by using an informal message. Here is an example the other way around--using a semi-formal message in a formal situation. This one uses the oral medium:

You all know Frank Dance who used to teach in our department at UWM. (I suppose that Frank Dance has been used for more examples for more different reasons than anyone else in our field.) Frank was a remarkably able public speaker and was much in demand on the platform.

One spring, Frank received an invitation to speak at a high school commencement out in Kansas. So he went out there and it was the middle of June and there is no place in this world hotter than a high school auditorium in Kansas in the middle of June.

Frank surveyed all these farm folk dressed in their starchy best and the students sweltering in their caps and gowns and he said to himself.

"I can't speak for an hour to these poor suffering souls. I'll talk about twenty minutes and I'll lighten up the speech a bit to keep them awake and they will be grateful for ever after."

Well, he did but they weren't.

In fact, they were furious.

Their intent, their expectations were for a formal presentation of an hour and they were quite prepared to--in fact, they expected to suffer--that was part of the ritual.

He came back on Monday and he came into my office and I asked him how it went.

"Mel," he said, "I blew it. They wanted me to be formal and I wasn't."

Dance's experience was probably an exception. I believe it is much more common the other way around.

How many boring, dull, lifeless committee meetings, speeches, written reports have you suffered through simply because someone was afraid to be informal? Dance wasn't afraid and, in that case, it backfired but it still was an example of a man trying to adapt to his audience and most of the time it would have been precisely the thing to do. I suppose the story

illustrates that if we succeed, we must also be prepared to fail.

We could afford to spend considerable time, it seems to me, helping our young people understand both the necessities and the difficulties inherent at this in-between level of language.

The third level, formal writing and speaking, is interesting. I submit that good writing and good speaking for today's world show almost no difference at this level. Articles in the professional journals begin as speeches at professional meetings or the other way around. Formal situations are simply more organized situations. The more organized the situation, the more the need and the opportunity for clarity. After all, organized thought is the basis for organized action.

Difficult as this level of writing and speaking may be, it probably does not cause us the most concern as far as audience expectations are concerned, simply because we take pains. We are aware of the difficulty and bring all the resources we have, including the help of others, into play. It is at this level where our true competence with the language is measured. Here we separate those who have mastered the language from those who have not.

There is a principle at work here which we ought to test for ourselves. That principle is: The greater your verbal facility, the smaller the difference between your written and your oral expression. Incidentally, we can no longer assume that permanence is a function of writing. As the Watergate tapes reveal, in an electronic age, permanence is a function of intent not of medium or channel. In an age of over-talk and over-writing, it will take interest, concern, craftsmanship and content for either talk

or writing to survive.

While we can't expect most high school or college students to have mastered their language to this degree, it seems unfortunate to me that we don't study more carefully those men and women who have. We ought to study models of good prose especially by those who have demonstrated, as it was said of Edmund Burke, that writing and speaking are parts of the same rhetorical endeavor.

Furthermore, those men and women who have used their language supremely well have done so not only in the traditional formal manner of the public speech but at all levels and under all conditions. It is instructive to consider Stevenson's beautiful tribute upon the death of a neighbor given in an informal situation or Charles Dickens, concerned enough about the echoes in a large barren hall where he was scheduled to speak, to go out and borrow the signal flags from a ship in the harbor to muffle the sound. Winston Churchill, who John F. Kennedy said "marshalled the language and sent it off to war," is also the young student struggling to master his language--even as you and I.

Such models demonstrate that every concern which we express for our students has been someone's concern before, every problem of reaching out to someone has been someone else's problem, every triumph and every tragedy of language has its example and its illustration in this oldest of humane studies.

We need to take more advantage of that Janus-like quality of language which allows us to look back to what has gone before but also to look ahead.

It is no small thing to teach our students that the English language is remarkably versatile, and that one ought to learn to use it in whatever way one needs to use it--that all of us are human beings reaching out to other human beings and that we will be not just speakers, but writers and listeners and readers and that we will be so for all of our days.

We must teach them that it is not our language that is inflexible--it is ourselves.